

*A Concise History
of Britain*
1707–1975

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Introduction

This concise history covers the period from the formation of the United Kingdom of Great Britain in 1707 to the entry of the British into the European Economic Community in the 1970s. Thus the chronology spans the whole history of Britain in the precise sense that the Union of 1707 brought it into being, ending the separate sovereignty of England and Scotland, and was for the Scots at least the ‘end of an auld song’; while membership of the EEC was a partial surrender of British sovereignty, even if few were prepared to recognise it or admit it.

To cover such a long period in such a short compass is inevitably to reduce a symphony to a sleeve note. Some concentration is required to pick out the main themes. The principal theme is that change has been evolutionary rather than revolutionary. The peaceful adjustment of institutions and social structure to changing circumstances has been largely due to the fact that, since the Glorious Revolution of 1688, machinery has always existed for effecting such changes without resort to rebellion or revolution. There have not been wanting rebels or revolutionaries – Jacobites in the eighteenth century, Jacobins in the early nineteenth, for example – but they have never appealed to more than a minority. The majority have either acquiesced in the status quo or accepted that desired changes could be obtained by persuasion rather than by force. The ruling class was always susceptible to being persuaded because it remained answerable to the electorate through parliament, which never ceased to function as a representative institution even in the so-called ‘age of oligarchy’ in the middle of the eighteenth century.



1 The Great Seal of Great Britain after the Union, 1707

Another cause of the peaceful transition of British society from an oligarchy to a democracy has been that, for most of the time, the economy literally delivered the goods. Alternatives to the existing system only became widely attractive in rare intervals when such buoyancy was not sustained. By and large people were not only spared starvation but, through an unprecedented growth of population, the standard of living was at worst sustained and at best improved. This was not regarded as a mere coincidence. On the contrary, the connexion between limited or mixed monarchy and economic growth by contrast with absolutism and stagnation or decline was hammered home in learned treatises and crude propaganda.

Clearly the themes of consensus politics and population expansion underpinned by economic development do not hold for Ireland. The tragic history of 'John Bull's other island' is not incorporated except when it could not be ignored by people on the mainland.

Chronologically the book has been carved up conventionally into centuries. It has become fashionable of late to talk about a long eighteenth century starting before 1700 and stretching to 1832. But the

Unions with Scotland at the beginning and Ireland at the end give the short century more coherence. The Union of 1707 altered the constitutional framework and the very nature of the British state. It brought Great Britain into being. Similarly the Union with Ireland set a new agenda for British politicians. Each century has a short analytical introduction followed by chapters narrating those political events which illustrate the main themes. The narrative tries to avoid being a mere chronicle. As far as possible the emphasis remains on the interaction between state and society as epitomised in the fluctuating relationship between parliament and the classes who controlled it and the electorate to whom they had ultimately to answer.